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TucsonAudubon Society hopes to delay Vigneto CMP approval

Vigneto's 'ecologically sensitive location' is a concern

BY DANA COLE dana.cole@svherald.com 12 hrs ago

BENSON - The Tucson Audubon Society is urging the City of Benson and developer El Dorado Holdings, Inc. to delay final approval of the Community Master Plan (CMP) for Villages at Vigneto.

In a 17-page statement dated Jan. 29, 2016 to the Benson City Council, City Hall and the Planning and Zoning Commission, Audubon urges the city and El Dorado to consult closely with such agencies as the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, Bureau of Land Management and Department of Defense -particularly Fort Huachuca - prior to finalizing Vigneto's proposed Community Master Plan. Audubon argues there is room for improvement when it comes to water use, preservation of sensitive wildlife habitats and the development's plant pallet, to name some of the organization's key concerns.

Requiring the completion of agency consultations and Federal permitting processes as a stipulation of the CMP could avert the "prospect of potential litigation of some sort," saving the city from costly future CMP amendments, Audubon warns.

Audubon is concerned about Vigneto's potential impact to the lower San Pedro River and wants the CMP to include "robust conservation and mitigation measures" as part of a revision to the Final CMP prior to approval.

The organization hopes the city will delay the project until the Army Corps of Engineers finishes a separate review of a federal permit it granted the project in 2008, said Tricia Gerrodette, president of the Huachuca Audubon Society, who noted three issues tied to the current permit. "The age of the permit is one issue, and the second is there are new endangered species and critical habitats in that area. The final issue is that the proposed development is 100 percent larger than the original project that received the permit 10 years ago," Gerrodette added.

"We continue to think that it's incumbent on Army Corps of Engineers to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding impacts to critical habitats and endangered species before this development can move forward," said Gerrodette.

El Dorado is proposing a 1,000-home master-planned community for Benson on a 100,000-acre property along Highway 101, south of I-10. While the project has the general support of local businesses, economic development organizations and chambers of commerce, the Tucson and Huachuca Audubon societies and other environmental groups are concerned about potential impacts to the San Pedro River Watershed and riparian area.

Audubon's statement, which bears the signatures of Tucson Audubon Society Executive Director aren Fogas, Conservation Chair Christina McVie and Conservation Policy Analyst Matt Clark, urges the city go through federal consultation and permitting processes and integrate the outcomes those consultations might produce into the CMP. Audubon also is pushing for compliance with the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the National Environmental Policy Act as part of the CMP.

"Effective, transparent consultation with these agencies will improve community quality of life and sustainability and give additional credibility to decisions the Benson City Council eventually makes regarding this high profile development," Audubon noted in its statement. "Of particular concern is Vigneto's ecologically sensitive location" in regard to the San Pedro River Watershed and potential impacts groundwater pumping could have on wildlife habitats and habitat connectivity.

Audubon also points to recommendations made by the City of Benson in its General Development Plan, a document approved and adopted in 2015. The water resources section of the city's plan states: "The San Pedro River corridor has been identified as one of the City of Benson's key amenities, and its protection is viewed as one of the community's highest priorities." The plan also includes a clause that calls for increased study and understanding of the city's subsurface water resources," for the community's long-term protection.

"To the best of our knowledge, since the 2015 Benson General Development Plan was adopted, the City has not yet 'encouraged increased study and understanding of the City's subsurface water resources' or demonstrated its intention to work collectively with other jurisdictions and agencies to protect and maintain the San Pedro River corridor," Audubon noted. Increased groundwater pumping in order to support Vigneto could have "long-term consequences for the sustainability of the City of Benson, adjacent and downstream landowners, Kartchner Caverns," and the surface water flows that sustain the river's riparian corridor.

Along with water concerns, Audubon maintains that Vigneto's proposed plant pallet is inconsistent with its goal of designing a community "inspired and influenced by its surroundings...intended to create a lifestyle made possible only by the unique characteristics of the local natural environment." Instead, Vigneto is proposing to introduce such non-native plants as the Russian olive tree, fountain grass, and Afghan, Aleppo and Italian Stone pines, to name a few. Audubon wants Vigneto's plant pallet to consist of desert-adapted native plant species only, as they provide the greatest benefit to endemic wildlife, while conserving water.

El Dorado expects to break ground with its master-planned community sometime mid-2016. The development, which will be modeled after an upscale community in Ocala, Fla., will be built around a town square and will offer an 18-hole golf course, neighborhood parks, open spaces, trails an amphitheater and much more. The developer promises a "world class design," where the region's natural features are woven with Old World architectural styles.

“I believe this development is going to be good for Benson, but we all need to make sure it gets done right,” said Benson Mayor Toney King. “We have to work together and do our best to make sure everyone is on the same page with this,” he added.

Once construction is underway, Vigneto is expected to bring a \$64 billion boost to Cochise County’s economy from build-out to completion and beyond.

“We (Audubon Society) continue to think that it’s incumbent on the Army Corps of Engineers to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding impacts to critical habitats and endangered species before this development can move forward.”

— Tricia Gerrodette, president of the Huachuca Audubon Society



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